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THE TWIG OF THORN

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AN IRISH FAIRY PLAY IN TWO ACTS

BY

MARIE JOSEPHINE WARREN

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THE TWIG OF THORN

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

NESSA TEIG, *the woman of the house.*
MAURYA, *her neighbor.*
OONAH, *Nessa's granddaughter.*
AENGUS ARANN, *a young peasant.*
AILEEL, *a wandering poet.*
FATHER BRIAN, *the priest.*
A FAERY CHILD.
FINULA, KATHLEEN, SHEILA, SHEAMUS, MARTIN, TUMAUS, } *neighbors.*

The scene is laid in the cottage of Nessa Teig, in County Galway, near Kylebeg, in the year of the Great Famine.

The characters are supposed to speak in Gaelic.

The first act is supposed to take place at twilight on the last day of March. The second on the first day of winter of the same year.

During the second act, the curtain is lowered for an instant to indicate the lapse of a half-hour.

THE FIRST ACT

THE TWIG OF THORN

THE FIRST ACT

The scene represents a kitchen in the cottage of Nessa Teig. A door at the back leads to the open air; another at the left to an inner room; there are beside two small neatly curtained windows. On the right there is an open grate with a turf fire burning on it, and a settle, two or three stools, and a spinning wheel before it. On the left, against the wall, is another settle; in the corner, a dresser with some earthen jugs and bowls upon it; and in the left centre, a table covered by a bright red cloth, and with several stools arranged about it. On a bracket is a cheap image of St. Brigit. Nessa, a very old woman, sits before the fire spinning flax and crooning in a tuneless, quavering voice. After a moment the door at the back opens and Maurya, another old woman, stands on the threshold.

Maurya.

GOD'S blessing on all in this house.

Nessa.

Eh? Come in, come in, neighbor. Come to the fire.

Maurya (*entering*).

Fire is very good, though a shadow of green is on the hedges and the thorn-tree at the three cross-roads has a branch that is blossomed. (*Crossing herself.*) Soon I'll be finding my herbs.

Nessa (*her hand to her ear*).

Eh? Why do you sign the cross? You stand on my deaf side.

Maurya (*crossing to Nessa's right*).

I sign the cross because the little people are about. There's a shadow of green on the hedges, and the thorn-tree at the three cross-roads has a branch that is blossomed. And as I walked, a whirl of wind went by me with a sound of laughter in it.

Nessa.

It's true for you. There's a mysterious feeling in the air these first green days. That's why I spin; for if one of them should open the door, and me with a thread of flax in my hand, he could not put any spell over me at all.

Maurya (seating herself).

You haven't the need to fear them, Nessa, while you've the blessed St. Brigit in your house.

(*Both look toward the image and cross themselves.*)

Nessa.

Yes, 'tis true. But they have great power when the thorn-tree blossoms and the wind blows — and my grandmother always had the flax by her, and her grandmother before her — there's a deal of virtue in the flax. (*Spins again.*) They do be saying that Aileel, the poet, wears a cord of it always around his body to keep him from the charm.

Maurya.

Why should that be? Sure his sweet songs cannot offend the little people!

Nessa.

No, 'tis loving him too much they are! There is no such harping in their land at all, and they would steal him away if they could. It is a great power he has against them, for the winds and the trees and the birds give him warning so that he will not fall into their traps!

Maurya.

Is it so!

(*There is a moment's pause. Nessa spins and Maurya watches her with new interest.*)

Maurya.

I did not think to be finding you alone, Nessa. Is not this the day that Father Brian was to fetch your granddaughter to you? At noon I heard the rattle of a cart upon the road.

Nessa.

In Conall's cart it was, he brought her this morning, and she beside herself with the look of the first green in the fields, and maybe a posy to gather. She was singing about

the house, and no sooner was the cloth off the table than she says, "'Tis maybe a flower I'll find you, granny darling," and off she is down the road. (*Proudly.*) 'Tis a flower she is herself — the colleen! But she must not be wandering off and her not knowing the turns of the way yet. (*Hobbles to the door at the back and calls.*) Oonah! Oonah! (*As she returns she stops at the table.*) See the beautiful red cloth, Maurya, that she brought me from Dublin, bought with her own bit of money she earned.

Maurya (*going over to finger the cloth*). From Dublin is it? 'Tis beautiful, 'tis beautiful! — Is it like her mother she is?

Nessa.

The very fetch of her, Maurya, with the sun on her head and the rose in her face. She's a good child, and 'tis natural she is wanting to look about in a new place. 'Tis all her life she has been in Dublin, and she says 'tis dirty it is, with smoke and mud, and more

houses than Kylebeg, and closer together, and markets to buy, and a church as big as Durgin Rossa's field.

Maurya.

And think of that!

Nessa (*returns to her spinning*).

And it's a long journey she's come, three days riding, and Father Brian borrowed Conall's cart and drove ten miles to Burren to bring her on to me.

Maurya.

Well I mind the day that Father Brian brought you her letter. 'Tis a wonderful man he is, to read a letter and know who 'tis for!

Nessa (*hand to her ear*).

Eh? What is it you're saying? You stand on my deaf side.

Maurya (*crossing to Nessa's right and seating herself again*).

The letter, I was saying.

Nessa (*proudly*).

Och the letter! 'Tis in the drawer of the dresser I keep it, with a fold of clean cloth over it. When Oonah comes in, you shall see how she can read it herself!

Maurya (*awestruck*).

She read it!

Nessa.

Indeed, it is true; each word she says just as clear and loud as a priest could do. (*Rising.*) What can be keeping the girl! 'Tis dark it will soon be growing. She has gone too far. (*Goes to the door and calls.*) Oonah! Oonah!

Maurya (*rising nervously*).

The good saints send no evil has come to her, with the little people laughing in the wind and the thorn in blossom and all and all! I wish Father Brian would be coming down the hill.

Nessa (*who has been peering out*).

I see herself coming. There's a man with her, that looks to be Aengus Arann. (*Returns to her wheel.*)

Maurya (*dropping back on her stool and raising her hands*).

The saints be praised, then. A fear came on me like a cold wind in at the door. Aengus will have showed her the road home, maybe.

Nessa.

Yes. 'Tis a good boy, Aengus, and a pity he has no bit of land of his own.

(*At the door at the back which Nessa has left ajar, Oonah appears, her face glowing; the hood of her long blue cloak has fallen back, and there are some pink blossoms in her hair and on her breast.*)

Oonah.

Oh granny darling, 'tis lost I've been. (*Speaking over her shoulder as she enters.*) Come in, then!

(*Aengus enters diffidently yet eagerly. He pulls off his cap, but does not take his eyes from Oonah, whom he watches like one under a lovely spell.*)

Nessa.

Yes, come in both of you — You're welcome, Aengus Arann.

Oonah (*eagerly*).

He brought me home — 'Twas one road just like another, with woods and fields and a hill, and bye and bye I came to a cottage just like this, but it was not.

Maurya.

'Twas mine, colleen.

Oonah.

Then you are granny's neighbor, Maurya! She told me of you living near.

Maurya (*pleased*).

Good neighbors for more than sixty years.

Nessa.

And 'twas Aengus found you?

Oonah.

I heard steps crackling through the twigs, and he parted the hedge and came through. (*She turns to Aengus and they stand looking wonderingly at each other just as they must have done on the road. There is a moment's silence.*)

Nessa (*impatiently*).

Well? Well? (*She sits by the wheel.*)

Aengus (*without taking his eyes from Oonah*). When I saw her the breath went out of my body and my bones turned to water and my heart turned to fire. She was one of the folk of the tribe of Danu, sure, I was thinking, and when she asked me her way at first, I could not hear what she said for the music of her voice. (*There is another little silence.*)

Nessa (*impatiently*).

Well? Well? How you stare! Speak louder, for you stand on my deaf side.

Oonah.

At first I thought he must be one of the heroes, he stood so tall against the sun!

Nessa (*crossly*).

Eh? I say I do not hear. (*Oonah starts and turns in confusion away from Aengus' look.*) Come here, colleen. You should not go so far from home until you learn the ways.

Oonah (*coming to kneel by Nessa*).

Oh! do not scold me, granny. This place is very green and beautiful, and I am happy here with you. I'm glad my sister's husband had to go away, and she with him, so that I must come to you. At first I cried, but now I'm happy — Oh! I've never been so happy in my life before.

Nessa.

I hear your mother speaking in your voice. She loved the place where she was born, and was sorry when her man tired of the farming and wanted to seek his fortune away in Dublin city. Then she was as young as you, and that's the last I saw of my girl, for she died in Dublin where you were born. (*She presses her fingers to her eyelids as if to stop the tears.*)

Oonah.

Let me be my mother in your house.

Nessa (*putting her hand on Oonah's head*).

'Tis a good child! (*Sharply drawing back.*) What is that flower in your hair?

Oonah (*takes the pink blossom from her hair*). There was a tree at the crossing of three roads — a tree all black and twisted — but one branch was blossomed!

(*Maurya and Nessa spring up in horror. Maurya crosses herself and her lips move as if in prayer. Nessa lays her hand upon the flax of her wheel. Aengus too, starts back and lays his hand across his eyes as if to keep from looking at her.*)

Oonah (*looking round in surprise*).

What is it? (*In growing fear.*) Why, granny! What is it, granny?

Nessa.

Oh, you have brought ill-luck into my house! You have broken the thorn-branch and spilled the sap, and brought the cursed flower into my house! Ochone!

Oonah (*taking the other blossoms from her breast*).

I do not understand! The air was bright and the wind full of laughter, and a song

was at my heart. The branch stretched across my way, and I did but break three blossoms. See!

Nessa.

It was the little people laughing in the wind!

(*She steps back in terror as Oonah holds the flowers toward her. She and Maurya clasp each other as if for protection.*)

Oonah.

"Little people!" Oh, what is it you're saying?

Maurya (*angrily*).

What! in Dublin they teach girls how to read like a priest — and this is what comes of it! Do you never hear there of the little people?

Oonah (*fearfully*).

No! what are they?

Nessa (*sits down and sways back and forth keening*).

Ochone! Oh, oh, Ochone! Sorrow and ill-luck have come to my hearth.

Oonah (*going to Aengus*).

Aengus, you will tell me what they mean.

Aengus (*taking her hand*).

'Tis them that ride on the winds, they're meaning, Oonah, — them whose name mustn't be mentioned at all. Their power is upon folk that sleep with the moonlight on them, and upon folk who long for too much happiness. They take away the selfish of heart to a land of wind and dancing waves and flaming stars. And those who do not have the blessing of the priest are there, and sometimes newly married brides are rapt away, or children that are too thoughtful.

Oonah (*wide-eyed*).

Will they take me because I broke the thorn?

Aengus (*drawing her to him, forgetful of everything save his new-born love and his desire to protect her*).

They shall not harm you! See, Oonah, let

me have the little flowers and I'll wear them over my heart. (*Gently tries to take them.*)

Nessa.

Oh, oh, the curse! Oh the curse and the sorrow!

Oonah (*drawing away from Aengus*).

No, Aengus, you shall not take my ill-luck upon you. I know! I'll burn them here on the hearth. Listen granny, dear granny! Will it comfort you if I burn them?

Nessa.

Oh, do not, for that would make the little people angry, and they would have power upon the hearth to do us harm. Throw the blossoms out of the door, and pray the saints to clean you of their touch.

Maurya.

Yes, Oonah, that is best.

Oonah.

Then I will go do it, never fear. (*To the flowers, half regretfully, half in fear.*) Poor

pretty things, you do not look accursed. (*She goes out, closing the door.*)

Aengus (*starting toward the door*).

Do not shut the door! (*To the others.*) She must not be alone and the darkness coming down. (*Makes as if to follow.*)

Nessa and Maurya.

No, no, wait!

(*All stand tensely expectant. There is a sighing of wind. The door opens and Oonah comes back slowly, her face strange, her eyes wide with mystery. Her hands are clasped over her heart.*)

Aengus.

What did you see?

Nessa.

Where are the thorn-flowers? Speak loud so I can hear you.

Oonah (*as if in a dream*).

A wind came up and caught them out of my hand, and whirled them round and

round. And one flew up and brushed across my lips, and one flew up and brushed against my heart, and one flew over my head and caught in the thatch above the door.

Nessa.

Did you not pray to the saints as I told you?

Oonah.

There was a sound of voices in the wind —voices and dancing feet.

Maurya (*catching Nessa's hand*).

Oh, Nessa, see the look upon her face! Her spirit is away.

Aengus (*going quickly to her, takes her clasped hands*).

They did not speak to you, Oonah?

Oonah (*looking at him as if she did not know him*).

To-night there will be something I must choose, but I think I shall choose wisely, for the voice said so.

Aengus (*sinking on his knee*).

Oonah! have they stolen the soul from the sweet body of you? (*As she does not answer, or look at him, he springs up.*) It is the cursed thorn hanging above the door. I will go take it down and throw it far away from the house. (*Rushes out. Outside he is heard to give a joyful shout. The door is flung open and Aengus and Father Brian appear on the threshold. Nessa and Maurya rise.*)

Father B.

A blessing on this house! (*He enters quickly.*) (*As Oonah hears the priest's voice her face changes; she runs to him, and kneeling close beside him, presses her cheek to his hand.*)

Aengus (*joyfully*).

'Tis the good father himself come to put an end to our trouble.

Father B.

Trouble? What is it then? Why, the colleen trembles like a reed at the lake. What is it, daughter?

Oonah.

Oh, Father, I have brought misfortune.

Nessa.

It was the cursed thorn at the three cross-roads she picked and brought into the house. And there was evil in it, for she spoke strangely and did not answer us.

Father B. (*sternly*).

Nessa, Nessa! And if it was a branch from the black rim of the world, have you not the blessed Saint Brigit under your roof? (*He points to the little image and all cross themselves.*) Let be with frightening the child with your talk of curses and ill-luck.

Oonah.

I did not mean to do wrongly, Father! The branch stretched across my way and I was happy.

Father B. (*tenderly*).

It is the heart of innocence! (*Lifting her gently to her feet.*) There are many powers

going up and down the world, colleen, and few of them that we can see and understand, but be sure that not any of them can harm the pure of heart.

Maurya.

There's a twig of the thorn caught in the thatch above the door still. Perhaps Father Brian will take it down for us.

Aengus.

I would have taken it, but it was gone.

Nessa.

Praise to the Saints, it is gone!

Oonah (*her hands clasped again over her heart*).

Could it harm me, Father?

Father B.

Do not bother your sunny head with the thoughts of it. Laughter is for the young. Aengus Arann, do not stand staring there, but run down the Burren road and give a call at each house that you pass. Say that

the grand-daughter of Nessa Teig is here, a new neighbor to us, and that there is to be the finest dance in the country when the candles are lighted.

Aengus (*starts joyously as if to go*).

But there will be no music, Father! If only Aileel were here, with the harp of him that puts dancing into the feet even of the old and the lame! Then there would be a fine welcome for Oonah.

Father B.

But the feet of the young can dance of themselves. Are you dumb, that you can't sing the Fiddler of Kerry for a reel?

Aengus.

Oh, the Fiddler of Kerry! Oonah, Oonah, will you be dancing it with me?

Oonah (*shyly*).

Do you want me to?

Father B. (*heartily*).

Of course she will! Now be off with you.

Aengus.

I'll run every step of the way to be back the sooner. (*He strides quickly to the door, stands looking back for a moment at Oonah, then goes.*)

Maurya (*rising with a sigh*).

I must be going, too.

Nessa.

No, no, Maurya. Stay and see the dancing, and 'tis young again you'll be thinking you are. Oonah, child, put down some potatoes by the fire and lay the cloth.

(*Oonah hurries to obey.*)

Nessa.

You'll sit down to a bit of supper with us and Father Brian. Hot bread from the griddle and maybe an egg or two.

Maurya.

No, no, thanks to you, neighbor. I've my own hens to feed, and old Michael will be in from the fields, hungry and thirsty, the dear man.

Father B.

I'll go up to the hill with you, Maurya, for I am on my way to bed-ridden Susan, on the Kylebeg road. She is worse and maybe needs me sorely.

Nessa.

Perhaps you'll look in at the dancing bye and bye when you pass, going home.

Father B.

Perhaps! Good-night, Nessa! Good-night, Oonah!

Nessa and Oonah.

Good-night, good-night.

(*At the door the priest lifts his hand in blessing. He and Maurya go out together. Twilight is falling.*)

Oonah.

Shall I help you put by the wheel, granny?

Nessa.

Yes, it's too old my eyes are to spin by firelight.

(*Together they move the wheel back to the corner behind the settle; when that is done,*

Nessa goes back to the fire and pokes it into a blaze.)

Oonah (*shyly*).

To-morrow I'll not be wandering away into mischief. I'll spin the flax for you, granny, and you shall fold your hands like a lady.

Nessa (*sitting on the stool*).

Come here, Oonah, to me.

Oonah (*kneeling beside her*).

You're not angry now, granny?

Nessa (*fondly*).

Listen to the foolish girl. It's your home here, Oonah, and you must not be lonely for Dublin.

Oonah.

Oh no!

Nessa.

Soon you'll be finding a good man to work for you, and when you are married, 'tis the foot of a stocking full of silver money that I

have to give you. Eh? shall you like that, colleen?

(*Oonah slips down till her cheek rests against Nessa's knee.*)

Nessa (*sings quaveringly*).

"Fasten your hair with a golden pin,
And on your bosom lay roses sweet,
For a hero rides on a milk-white steed
To lay his glad dreams under your feet."

Eh? shall you like that, colleen? Now run and light the candles, and I must be feeding my gray hens or they'll give us no eggs. (*Rises and bustles to the door at the left.*) Light the candles. (*Goes out.*)

Oonah (*remains sitting on the floor. After a moment she turns to make sure that she is alone. Then she draws from her bosom a crushed pink thorn-blossom and looks at it curiously in the firelight*).

I hope it was not wicked to keep it. Father Brian said it would not harm the pure of heart — and I have no evil thoughts; I only

want to be happy. It hung from the thatch just above the door and beckoned, and the voice said, — (*puzzled*) no, not a voice! there was a crying of the wind, and in my heart I knew that if I took the flower again and kept it hidden, I should choose wisely. (*Rising, half frightened.*) But I do not know what I shall have to choose between! It is strange I feel, and I wish I had told Father Brian. He would tell me to throw it away, maybe. (*She moves toward the door irresolutely, then stops.*) And yet, how can a bit of a flower bring harm? But granny was afraid, and old Maurya and even Aengus — but he would have taken my curse on himself. (*Dreamily.*) His arms are strong and safe, and he is kind. Maybe its unhappy I'll make him by keeping the bit of thorn. (*The flower draws her eyes as a power of fascination.*) It must be very wonderful to dance upon the winds and waves to dance and dance and never be weary or old. (*She lifts her arms as if to dance; the flower falls to the floor, and as it leaves her hand the spell seems broken; she draws*

back in terror.) It's wicked thoughts I'm thinking. (*She catches sight of the image of the saint on its bracket.*) Blessed Saint Brigit, keep me safe from this wicked flower! (*She catches up the flower and hides it behind the image, then springs back in terror.*) Oh! at the blessed touch of her, the thorn withered and grew black as if the holy thing had burned it! (*She retreats across the room and stands trembling by the hearth, when Nessa enters at the left with eggs in her hands.*)

Nessa.

What! no candles lighted? Why the boys and the girls will be coming to the dancing and find no welcome here.

Oonah.

Oh Granny! I grew frightened in the dark! There are no voices in the wind in Dublin, nor cursed flowers there. I think it is safer in Dublin.

Nessa (*comfortingly*).

You are a silly girl. See the two good eggs

we shall eat to-morrow. Were there such large eggs in Dublin? Come, hurry with the lights, for I hear voices on the road.

(*Oonah takes two candles from the dresser and hurries to the fire to light them. As she kneels by the hearth the door swings open, and a laughing, pushing group enters, headed by Aengus. There are Finula, Kathleen, and Sheila, with knots of gay ribbon in their hair and on their breasts, and Sheamus, Martin and Tumaus, who pull off their caps bashfully.*)

Aengus.

Good luck upon this house! Nessa, may we come in?

Nessa.

'Tis welcome you are, neighbors! Oonah, see!

(*Oonah rises and turns to them with a lighted candle in each hand. They stop laughing and pushing and stare at her, surprised at her beauty.*)

Sheamus.

Och, but she is beautiful!

Martin.

It's like a saint she is with the candles and all.

Tumaus.

Or like Niamh[1] that Oisin[2] followed to the Land of the Young.

Nessa (*taking the candles from her and setting them on the dresser*).

Greet the neighbors, Oonah. This one is Sheila, and there is Maurya's granddaughter Kathleen, and here is Finula from the wood-road.

Sheila (*shyly*).

We are here to welcome you, Oonah.

Oonah.

'Tis a fine welcome it is, and it's glad I am to be neighbor to you. (*She dips a courtesy.*)

(*The neighbors stand awkwardly grouped about the door, not coming further into the room. Now and then one pushes another forward a step or two and all giggle.*)

[1] Pronounced Neé-av. [2] Pronounced Us-sheén.

Nessa.

Come in, come, in and find chairs for yourselves.

(*The girls sit on one side of the room rather primly; the boys huddle on the settle on the other side. They nudge each other and laugh under the breath.*)

Sheila (*politely to Oonah*).

Dublin is a fine large city I'm thinking. (*Smooths her apron and pats her ribbons.*)

Oonah (*shyly*).

Yes.

Finula.

'Tis a long journey you've come.

Oonah.

Yes.

Kathleen.

Is it long you're staying here?

Oonah.

All my life I'm staying — till maybe I'm married!

The Neighbors.

Oh! (*They sit forward and look at her with new curiosity.*)

Nessa (*who listens with her hand to her ear; encouragingly*).

That's right — that's right.

Sheamus (*boldly*).

Is it promised you are?

Oonah.

Not yet.

Sheamus.

Are there no men in Dublin, then?

Martin.

Hear Sheamus, now. (*The rest laugh and nudge each other; he is embarrassed.*)

Oonah.

My sister is married, and her man had to go away for work and she with him, and I would be alone.

Kathleen.

Is it no parents you have at all?

(*Oonah shakes her head. They murmur pityingly. There is an embarrassed little pause. Then Aengus, who has been standing in the background, steps forward.*)

Aengus.

Oonah, you're not forgetting that you said you would dance the Fiddler of Kerry with me?

Oonah (*jumping up eagerly*).

Oh yes, the dancing!

Nessa (*heartily*).

Move the table back to the wall!

(*Everyone springs up to help clear the room. Embarrassment vanishes and each merrily seizes a partner. Nessa sits in the chimney corner, nodding approvingly.*)

Aengus.

Come, come! In a line then! Oonah and I will lead off.

(*They dance a lively country dance, one couple*

at a time, while the rest sing and clap time. Between stanzas they walk in a circle, stamping and clapping, the head couple going to the end of the line, the others moving up toward the head.)

SONG

I

Oh, once there was a fiddler making tunes in County Kerry,
And the folk they gathered round him, a-laughing all with glee.
And it's everyone that heard him making tunes in County Kerry,
Fell to dancing, dancing, dancing, like the waves upon the sea.

II

Oh — the old men, the young men, the women and the children,
And those that had but one leg, came running for to see,
And it's every single one of them, that heard the fiddle calling,
Fell to dancing, dancing, dancing, like the leaves upon the tree.

III

Oh — he fiddled night and morning, and he fiddled noon and twilight,
He fiddled days and Sundays too, and no one could be free,
For it's every single minute that they heard his bow a-scraping
They were dancing, dancing, dancing, like the wind upon the lea.[1]

(*As the dancers march in the circle after the dancing of the last couple there is the sound of harping outside; all stand still, listening eagerly.*)

Aengus.

Good luck to us, neighbors, it is Aileel!

All (*joyously*).

Aileel! Aileel, the harper! Aileel the poet!

(*The door is thrown open and Aileel is seen, playing a small harp. He is quaintly dressed in crimson, and a long cloak hangs from his shoulders. As he strikes the last chord, the babble of conversation rises to greet him.*)

[1] For the fourth couple the first stanza is repeated.

The Neighbors.

Welcome, Aileel! Come in, come in!

(*Aileel pays no heed to the calls. He looks gravely at Oonah and seems to see no one else.*)

Nessa (*bustling out of her corner*).

'Tis an honor it is, for he is the greatest poet in Ireland. Lead him in, Oonah.

Oonah (*going to him shyly*).

Will you come in to our hearth, poet? (*Gives him her hand.*)

Aileel.

I will go where you lead.

(*Aengus watches them jealously as they speak together.*)

Aileel (*speaking to Oonah and ignoring the rest*).

I knew that I should find you when I came.

Oonah.

What do you mean? You do not know me.

Aileel.

I have known you ever since the beginning of the world.

Oonah.

How can that be?

(*The others, awed and curious, press forward listening.*)

Aileel.

I know you because you are all the beauty of the world. You are the moon in the sky on a still night; you are the swaying shadows on the grass, and the golden dancing primroses; you are the music of the wind and the mystery of the stars and the fragrance of all the flowers.

Finula (*to the others*).

Just hear the golden tongue of him. Tis wonderful.

Nessa (*her hand to her ear*).

I wish he would speak louder, for it is a great poet he is.

Oonah (*under the spell of Aileel's words*).

Your voice is like the music of your harp, poet.

Aileel.

Tell me your name, oh beauty of the world.

Oonah.

Oonah.

Aileel.

What music and what sweetness folded close in one little word! Oonah, Oonah, Oonah! It is a song of itself.

Kathleen.

Oh isn't she the lucky girl! He is making a song of her name.

Nessa (*crossing*).

Let me go on the other side. Perhaps I can hear then what he is saying.

Aileel.

To-night the world was full of mystery, and my heart was seeking. But when I passed this house, a great white peace came on my heart, for then I knew that you were here.

Aengus (*in anguish*).

He is stealing her heart with the golden tongue of him. Oh Oonah!

The Others.

Be quiet, Aengus. Hush! (*They push him back.*)

Aileel.

Oh white little hand in mine, you are a little white bird, and it's in your nest you are, safe. Oh grey eyes that look into mine, you are two bright stars, and my soul is the deep lake that is reflecting your brightness.

Oonah (*softly*).

I did not know that words could be so sweet.

Aengus (*breaking away from those that hold him and flinging himself beside Oonah*).

Oh Oonah darling, 'tis just words it is, and you're letting them steal your heart.

Oonah (*starts and turns to him*).

Why, Aengus!

Aileel (*haughtily*).

And who is Aengus Arann that he should speak to you now? What right, Aengus, have you? Are you a poet?

Aengus (*desperately*).

No, I am a lover.

Nessa.

Oh the boldness of him. Take him away.

Martin.

'Tis crazy he is! Come away, Aengus. (*Lays a hand on him.*)

Aengus (*shaking off the hand angrily*).

If Oonah sends me I shall go — but only then! Shall I go Oonah? It is you that must choose.

Aileel.

You are right, lover, Oonah shall choose! You shall make a poem with me, and Oonah shall give her hand to the best of us.

All.

A contest! A contest!

Tumaus.

Aileel will win. He is the greatest poet in Ireland.

Oonah.

My choice, my choice! Oh help me, little faded flower of thorn.

Nessa.

What does she say?

Kathleen.

Her words mean nothing.

All.

The contest, the contest! Begin, Aileel.

Aileel (*stepping forward*).

This is my poem for Oonah! Listen! (*Half chants, touching his harp.*)

My love is the sum of all beauty!
Oh women of Ireland, shake out the dim fragrant mass of your hair and blind the eyes of your men, for if they see Oonah of the grey eyes, their hearts will go from you.

My love is the sum of all beauty.
Oh come to me, Oonah of the grey eyes, and I will show you all the country of love. Under the honey-pale moon we will walk together, your hand

in mine, and I will look into your grey eyes and sing my love, till my soul is mist before you — till your soul is the sun gathering the mist to itself.

My love is the sum of all beauty.
Oh, Oonah, Oonah, my heart is knocking at your breast! Give it peace in your heart, Oonah, for I love you and my love will burn like flame, till the stars are snatched out of the sky and all the valleys of the world are withered and dried.
(*He steps back; the others cheer him, clapping their hands.*)

Aengus.

Oonah, I cannot sing with the harp, nor make fine words. I am poor, without even a bit of land of my own. But if you will give me your love, it's like a madman I'll work for you, Oonah. I have just my two hands to work and my heart to love you, and I'm fearing I've lost you. But to-day in your trouble, I held you in my arms, and the joy of it will keep me a long time from death, for no one can take that from me. When I saw you my heart went out of my

eyes to you, and you have it now, whether you want it or not; and there is nothing left in my breast but pain — and joy!

(*Aengus steps back. The others push forward excitedly. There is a moment of waiting. Then Oonah turns to Aengus and gives him her hands.*)

Oonah.

Oh Aengus, the moon and the stars are beautiful, but they are far away. Your hands are strong. *I* think you are the greatest poet in the world.

(*Aengus takes her in his arms; they have forgotten the rest.*)

Aileel (*breaking the strings of his harp*).

It's right she is. I will never sing again.

CURTAIN

THE SECOND ACT

THE TWIG OF THORN

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is laid again in Nessa's kitchen. The time is late afternoon, gray and cheerless. There is a fire in the grate, and Oonah sits alone before it, dreaming, with her head in her hands; she is dressed soberly. For a moment there is silence. Then there is a knock at the door. She starts sharply, rises and goes to open it. A tall thin figure muffled in a gray cloak is vaguely seen outside the door.

Figure (*wailingly*).

GIVE me the taste of food.

Oonah.

Oh poor stranger! I have nothing left but a little meal in the bottom of the bag. But you are welcome. (*She leaves the door ajar and goes through the door at the left, returning at once with a bowl of meal. She pours half into a smaller bowl on the dresser, and with*

this in her hand flings the door wide open. No one is there.) Where are you friend? I have meal for you. (*As there is no answer, she turns quickly back, closes the door and stands against it, her hand upon her heart.*) Twice before to-day have strangers asked for food; and when I come again they are gone. Oh these are dreadful days! Praise to the saints that Granny did not live to see the famine. (*She sets the bowl on the table and goes slowly back to the fire.*) Sometimes I've the fancy 'twas I brought the bad luck to Galway, with the crops all dead in the ground, and the cattle dropping from hunger and thirst. And to-day it is, winter comes in. (*Again there is a knock at the door. Oonah turns fearfully and hesitates before going to open it. Kathleen enters.*)

Oonah.

'Oh, Kathleen 'tis glad I am that 'tis you.

Kathleen.

It is lonely you were, alone by the fire.

Oonah.

Lonely — and maybe a bit frightened too. Three times to-day have strangers come crying for food, and when I would have given them the poor bit that I had, there was no one here.

Kathleen (*crossing herself*).

Oh, Oonah, you should not be giving to them. Sure 'tis no men they are, but the hunger phantoms that are bringing the sorrow to Ireland. Evil powers are abroad on the first day of winter. This morning there was a woman found dead at the three cross-roads, and it's nothing but skin and bones she was, the poor creature.

Oonah.

Heaven rest her! She had wandered far, maybe, in search of food.

Kathleen.

'Tis in Clare they say the hunger is worse than here. The people eat dock and dandelion.

Oonah.

Oh Kathleen, Kathleen, my heart is heavy with fear, for it is to Clare Aengus went at the ploughing time to work for a rich farmer, and maybe earn enough money to buy a share of land for ourselves, for without it he would not be married.

Kathleen.

And have you no word of him?

Oonah.

No word at all, but I'm hoping he tramped on to some other county, maybe, where there is better luck.

Kathleen.

If he would only come back, you would not need to be waiting, for now that Nessa is gone, Heaven bless her, you've this house of your own.

Oonah.

And a lonely house it is. Oh Kathleen, Aengus is long away.

Kathleen.

'Tis true — and yet it seems to be but yesterday the choosing was, when Aengus and Aileel made songs for you. 'Twas a wonderful song Aileel made, Oonah.

Oonah.

But I liked the song of Aengus better.

Kathleen.

If he came back now that Aengus is away wouldn't you have him, Oonah?

Oonah.

Don't say such things to me! (*Passionately.*) If Aengus did not come back I'd live lonely all my life.

Kathleen.

There — I was only making a bit of fun. But 'tis a queer girl you are, Oonah, everyone says, not to be proud to have such a great poet loving you, and him away by himself making no more songs for the broken heart of him.

Oonah.

I am sorry for that, but I cannot help it. Maybe you'd like to have him yourself, Kathleen.

Kathleen.

Of course — if it were not for Sheamus.

Oonah (*laughing and kissing her*).

Oh you and your Sheamus!

Kathleen.

I am going to see old Maurya and Michael. (*Going.*) 'Tis bed-ridden he is, and 'tis bad enough for old people when the crops have failed. I fear they'll be needing food.

Oonah.

Take this to them then, the dear people. (*Presses the bowl of meal into Kathleen's hand.*)

Kathleen.

But 'tis maybe all you have.

Oonah.

I've enough for one more baking of bread, and in the toe of Granny's stocking there are

still some pieces of copper and silver, to buy of richer folk.

Kathleen.

'Tis a good neighbor you are. Happiness to you. (*Goes out after kissing her.*)

Oonah (*stands at the door looking after her; suddenly she draws back quickly and closes it as if in fear*).

A child in green with long, wild, unbound locks went by me in the wind! Oh, ever since I kept the twig of thorn and hid it, I have seen strange things and heard strange laughter and far voices calling. I wish I dared take the thorn down from behind the blessed saint and throw it far away. Maybe its power is gone; 'tis black and dry—and yet I'm afraid to be laying hand on it. I've tried to tell good Father Brian of it, but he only pats my hand and bids me not to give my mind to idle dreams. The little people never trouble him; he is too pure of heart and never thinks of happiness for himself. I will not think of it but take my knitting. (*She takes her knit-*

ting from the drawer of the dresser and sits in the firelight.) 'Tis a stocking for Aengus it is, but he does not know of it. What was it Granny was singing? (*Sings.*)

Fasten your hair with a golden pin,
And on your bosom lay roses sweet,
For a hero rides on a milk-white steed
To lay his glad dream under your feet.

(*She falls to dreaming. The door opens softly and Aileel stands on the threshold. His harp with the broken strings is in his hand, his head bare, his face pale, his manner dreamy and strange.*)

Aileel (*softly*).

Oonah.

Oonah.

Aileel, is it you?

Aileel (*entering*).

A great horned owl flew over me in the woods crying warning, and I came to you.

Oonah.

You are welcome, poet.

Aileel.

Poet no longer, but still your lover. Oonah, I was away in the hills alone and dreaming of you, and the trees bent down and whispered your name, and the birds sang it, and I knew that all was well with you. But three days ago a vision came upon me. I saw a snow-white deer without horns running upon the wind, and then a monstrous hound with one red ear running after, and the hound caught the deer and worried it. And then I saw a girl with yellow hair running upon the wind, —and her eyes were like yours! — but a man on a black horse came plunging after, and the man caught the girl and carried her away. And a sound of singing grew in my ears, and a sound of dancing feet and revelry. And I knew that the Hosts of Sidhe[1] were rejoicing, and it was you, Oonah, you that they had rapt away!

Oonah.

Oh Aileel, was it not a dreadful dream?

[1] Pronounced *Shee.*

Aileel.

Not a dream but truth — for when the vision was gone, I sprang up to come to you, leaping and running, and the trees whispered, "Haste! Haste!" and in the woods as I ran, a great horned owl cried warning.

Oonah.

Aileel, I too am afraid, for I have seen strange things. Three times to-day a tall gray stranger came, asking food, and then I saw a child in green with flying hair go by me in the wind. What must I do, Aileel?

Aileel.

This is the first day of the winter, and to-day the Hosts of the Air are in their greatest power. Oh Oonah, famine is walking in the land. Come with me! My love is more than any words can tell. I'll take you to the high hills and the clear spaces above this hungry country, and I'll keep you safe and happy there. Will you not come?

Oonah.

Do not ask me that.

Aileel.

The speech of the birds I'll teach you, and where to find the sweetest herbs and the most fragrant flowers, and I'll make you songs all day.

Oonah.

I am promised to Aengus, and if he were poor and old I could love no one but him.

Aileel.

Is there no word I can say to change you?

Oonah.

No word in all Ireland.

(*Aileel turns despairingly away. There is a sound of running outside. Kathleen bursts in, not noticing Aileel in her excitement. She pants her message, kisses Oonah, then hurries away.*)

Kathleen.

Happiness to you, Oonah darling. Aengus Arann himself is on the Kylebeg road. On

the crest of the hill he is. 'Tis glad I am that happiness is coming to you! (*Exit.*)

Oonah.

Aengus on the Kylebeg road! Aileel! Aileel! Do you hear? Aengus is coming to me.

Aileel.

Oh, I will go away.

Oonah.

No, Aileel, no! You came in kindness, and Aengus will thank you. Stay for a bit of supper with us. Oh it's glad I am that I have a bit of meal left for the griddle-bread. (*She hurries to the dresser and pours water into the bowl of meal and begins to mix it with eager happiness.*)

Aileel.

To see his happy face and hear him call your name? No, no — I'll go back to the hills. (*He goes to the door, hesitates, and turns back.*) A great horned owl flew over my head crying warning, and a vision of fear went by me

in the wind. I'll go back to the hills — but, Oonah, do not forget — the hosts of the air are close about you, and 'tis great power they have over those who wish for happiness!

Oonah (*gaily*).

I am so happy, Aileel, that I cannot wish for anything better, so I've nothing to fear. It's kindness you're meaning, and my thanks to you, and it's himself who will thank you too, if you will wait till he comes.

Aileel.

Oh, the happiness of you! (*He looks at her for a moment wistfully, then catches her hand and kisses it and hurries out.*)

Oonah (*looking curiously at the hand he has kissed*).

I'm sorry 'tis so unhappy he is — but I'd rather it would be Aileel than Aengus, unhappy.

(*She stirs the meal and puts it on a griddle by the fire, singing softly under her breath; puts a white cloth on the table and some*

bowls and a pitcher, stopping to peep at the bread. Then she takes a knot of bright-colored ribbon from the drawer of the dresser and is pinning it in her hair when the door swings open.)

Aengus (*enters with a staff over his shoulder, on which a small package tied in a red handkerchief swings*).

Oonah!

Oonah (*running into his arms*).

Oh, Aengus, Aengus! It was Kathleen told me you were on the Kylebeg road, and I knew it was here first you'd be coming. See, the table is spread, and the griddle-bread is browning by the fire. Come and warm yourself. (*Stands his staff against the corner, and draws him to the fire.*)

Aengus (*sits on the settle, Oonah kneeling beside him*).

It's hungry for the sight of you I am, little rose! Oh the long, long days it has been since the night we were promised.

Oonah.

And you went away to seek your fortune, Aengus, and said you'd be coming back with your pockets full of money for a bit of a home for ourselves.

Aengus (*sadly*).

That was a fine bright dream.

Oonah.

Why do you speak so sadly? Are you not glad to be here?

Aengus.

I'm glad to be here, and sorry to go away again.

Oonah.

You will not go away.

Aengus.

Ah yes, for 'tis no fortune I've made at all, but I've come back with empty pockets. There were no crops in Clare, and not work enough for their own men to be doing. It's far I've

walked, Oonah, and everywhere nothing but sorrow and want; and whenever I earned a share of money for ourselves, there was some old woman or maybe a child needing it. 'Tis another long while before I can marry you, Oonah.

Oonah (*rising*).

And why should I wait for you any longer? Isn't there a roof here to cover us both, and a fire to keep us warm, and silver-pieces in the stocking?

Aengus.

Do you think I would marry you, then, with not a thing in the world to bring you but myself?

Oonah (*softly*).

But it was yourself you offered me the night you made me the song against Aileel. It was yourself that I chose in spite of all that he said.

Aengus.

It is not I that like the waiting, Oonah, for every day I am loving you more than the day before.

Oonah (*letting him take her in his arms*).
Then you'll not be too proud to marry me when it's I that have the home and the bit of silver to share with you.

Aengus.
Oh, colleen, what kind of a man would I be to do that? — a beggar from the high-road without a penny in his pockets! 'Tis a hard winter coming and famine in the land, and you'll be glad of all that you have to keep off the cold and hunger. There'll be no place about here that a man can get work, Oonah, with every man in danger of starving. I could not take your bit of fortune.

Oonah (*drawing angrily away*).
You do not love me.

Aengus.
Oonah, what are you saying?

Oonah.
It's all words that you are saying. It's someone else, maybe in Clare, you've given your

love to, and now you're breaking your promise to me. Well, 'tis broken!

Aengus.

You don't know what you're saying. There's no one I love but you.

Oonah.

If you loved me you'd be wanting to marry me, and not shaming me when it's I that am asking you.

Aengus.

Oonah, darling, listen to me. (*Tries to take her hand.*)

Oonah.

You'd rather starve in a hedge than marry me.

Aengus.

No, no, it's not true!

Oonah.

Will you marry me then?

Aengus.

Will you be listening, darling?

Oonah.

Oh, I was a foolish girl to believe you. It's talking that's cheap, and I'll listen no more. And I was so happy to have the bit of a fortune for you. (*Cries.*)

Aengus (*takes her in his arms*).

Och, the dear silly girl!

Oonah (*furiously*).

Go away from me, Aengus Arann, — but I'll not stay alone in this house! (*Runs to the door and flings it open.*) Come, faeries, take me out of this lonely house.

Aengus (*in horror*).

You don't know what you're saying!

Oonah.

Yes, I do know. I'm tired of sitting here alone, waiting and waiting and old before my time! Come, faeries, take me out of this lonely house! I want to ride upon the winds with you, and dance upon the waves and the moonbeams!

Aengus (*rushing to her; tries to close the door*). Oonah! Oonah!

Oonah.

Come, faeries, take me out of this lonely house!

(*A gust of wind rushes in at the door, and the image of the saint is blown from its little shrine and broken. The thorn-flower is seen to be blooming fresh, and seems to shed light. A faery child in misty green robes and long unbound black hair stands in the doorway. Her hands are full of primroses.*)

Oonah (*in terror of what she had done*). Aengus, Aengus!

Aengus (*crossing himself*).

Now God send by His strength between us and the hosts of the Sidhe[1]! (*Addressing the faery:*) What do you want?

Faery.

One called on us! We have come, Oonah,

[1] Pronounced *Shee.*

running upon the wind, and the sound of your voice was speed to our feet.

Aengus.

Oonah, what have you done!

Oonah (*in fear*).

I am afraid! Oh, I am very wicked, for I hid the thorn and gave them power over me! And now, the blessed saint is overthrown, and see, the withered flower is blossoming again.

Faery (*scattering primroses on the threshold*).

Come Oonah! We wait for you. See, I make a little golden path for your feet.

Oonah.

I am afraid. Oh, Aengus, take me close in your strong arms.

Faery (*running between them, scatters primroses*).

You cannot cross the little golden flames!

(*She dances, scattering primroses, tossing them in the air, and weaving a spell all about*

the room. Aengus more than once tries to cross the primroses, but cannot, and finally stands hopeless. Oonah seems to be in a dream. Faery voices are heard singing outside while the child dances.)

FAERY SONG

I

Oh we are the Hosts of the Sidhe,
We dance on the foam and the mist;
Our feet beat their time in a ring,
On the dew that the moonbeams have kissed.
Oh come to us, mortal, oh come!
On the path of gold primroses flung,
To make golden the way for your feet
To the wonderful Land of the Young.

II

Oh, the beautiful Land of the Young
Where loveliness rules in her might,
Where joy never dies in the heart,
Where the day never fades into night.
Oh come to us, mortal, oh come, *etc.*

III

The stars and the waves make a song
Ever new, ever woundingly sweet;
The fragrance of roses and thyme
Rises fresh at the touch of our feet.

Oh come to us, mortal, oh come, *etc.*

IV

A hundred glad years are a day —
Our joyance is endlessly free,
And our feet ever young in the dance,
For we are the Hosts of the Sidhe.

Oh come to us, mortal, oh come, *etc.*

(*Suddenly Aileel appears in the open door. The child ceases her dancing spell, but continues to sway as if blown by an invisible wind.*)

Faery.

Come, Oonah, we wait for you.

(*Oonah looks at her in a dream and sways toward her.*)

Aileel.

A great horned owl flew over my head crying warning, and I came again!

Faery (*to Aileel*).

You cannot cross the primroses.

Aileel.

Let me cross them! I have tidings for you.

Faery.

You cannot cross the primroses.

Aileel.

Let me cross them! I am Aileel, the poet.

Faery.

But you make no more songs.

Aileel.

For love of her I have made no songs, but for love of her I will make songs for you. Let me cross the primroses; I have a bargain for you.

Faery.

Come!

Aileel (*enters swiftly, goes to the little shrine and siezes the thorn-blossom; then turns.*)

Listen, daughter of Danu, for I hold your

magic thorn, and on myself I take the curse it brings. Listen, Hosts of the Air that fill this house, you have enough of dancers in your ring—but none to harp for your dancing. Come, I bargain with you! Take me in her stead!

Faery.

Will you come? Will you come, Aileel?

Aileel.

Within one little hour I will come. See, I will wear the thorn as a pledge. (*Places it over his heart.*) At sunset I follow you.

Faery (*dancing to the door*).

Brethren of the Air! Aileel is ours! (*Dances in ecstasy.*)

(*There is a sound of laughing all about the house.*)

Aileel.

Now take away your spell and go, for I have yet an hour in the world.

Faery.

I obey. (*Touches Oonah on eyes, lips and*

heart with the primrose, and dances laughing away.)

Aengus.

Oh Aileel, what have you done?
(*Aileel signs him to keep silence.*)

Oonah.

I must have slept. Oh, such a strange dream it was. (*In surprise.*) Aileel, when did you come?

Aileel (*taking Oonah's hand, leads her to Aengus*).

Take her to the priest, Aengus, and be quick, for I must dance at your wedding feast!

Aengus.

Yes, yes, I will go! Oh, Aileel, I have not a thing in the world of my own but my love for Oonah. If I had, I would share with you till the day of my death!

Aileel.

Do not be wasting time. If I could marry her, I would overtake the wind with my

running. Shut what you have seen in your heart and go, — go to the priest.

Aengus.

Oonah, will you go to the priest with me?

Oonah (*shyly*).

What, now? I do not understand. Do you want me?

Aengus.

Want you? (*Catching her in his arms.*) You're the sun and the moon and the stars, Oonah, and when I'm not with you, it's in the dark I am. Come!

Aileel (*to Oonah*).

I beg a gift of your friendship.

Aengus.

Whatever he asks you, darling, give it him twice.

Oonah.

Why yes, of course, Aengus. How strange you are. I wish I could remember what I dreamed! What gift, Aileel?

Aileel.

To dance with you at your wedding feast.

Oonah.

A wedding feast in the famine time? Oh, no — but if there were a feast, it is with you I would dance.

Aileel.

Then I am happy. Go, for an hour is short. Make haste, I say.

Aengus (*with his arm about Oonah, leads her out*).

Come, love!

(*Aileel looks wistfully after them. The curtain falls for an instant to indicate the lapse of half an hour. The scene is unchanged, except that on the bracket where the St. Brigit stood, some fresh red roses blossom.*)

(*After a moment the door at the back is opened and Aengus and Oonah come in. On the threshold he kisses her.*)

Aengus.

Little rose of a wife! I can scarcely believe

it is not dreaming I am. Only an hour ago I was full of bitterness and sorrow because I thought I must be leaving you again — and now the blessed words are said.

Oonah.

'Tis a wonderful day, like a dream, for 'tis so happy I am, that I seem to have heard lovely music and seen a strange sight. 'Tis like a mist in my mind. But here is our own cozy home, that is real and warm, — and a fire on the grate, and even a bit of griddle-bread browning for our wedding feast! Look!

Aengus.

'Tis not the feast I was planning to give you, Oonah, darling.

Oonah (*kisses her fingers and lays them on his lips*).

That is to keep you from grumbling.

Aengus.

How could I be grumbling, with you for my own! — But often and often when I've

tramped from one farm to another in search of work, or slept at night under a hedge, maybe, to be saving for you, I have thought of this room, and you a bride in it, and all the good neighbors coming in.

Oonah (*falling into his mood*).

Kathleen and Sheamus and Sheila and maybe old Maurya. — 'Twould not be famine time in your dream, Aengus.

Aengus.

No, no. They would all be bringing gifts — a basket of setting eggs maybe, and a fine web of cloth and a sack of potatoes. And we would have a fine feast for them, — a pitcher of red wine and a pitcher of milk, and a bowl of nuts, and little white sweet-cakes!

Oonah.

And then the dancing! I would dance with Aileel, because it would make him happy, he said — and oh Aengus! 'tis I that's wanting everybody to be happy, because I'm so happy myself.

Aengus.

The dear loving heart of her! Can you be happy with just a poor man, with no feast and no wedding guest?

Oonah.

My man is not poor, for 'tis plenty of love he has. And here is a feast for us — good water cold in the pitcher, and brown, hot bread from the griddle. Come, draw up a stool to the table, for the cloth is laid.
(*There is a knock at the door.*)

Oonah.

And here is the wedding guest! (*She runs to the door and admits Aileel. He still carries the harp with the broken strings, and the twig of thorn is on his breast.*) Welcome to you!

Aengus (*heartily*).

'Tis our first guest you are to give us joy.

Aileel (*strangely*).

I give you joy with all my heart.

Oonah (*stepping back from him, half puzzled, half frightened*).

My dream! There is something I cannot remember.

Aengus.

Come, Oonah, ask our guest to share the bit of supper with us.

Oonah.

Yes, yes, draw up another stool! 'Tis not a great feast, Aileel, but famine is abroad, and we are glad of our bite and sup. Aengus, take up the griddle. (*Sits at the table.*)

Aengus (*at the hearth*).

'Tis a wonderful big cake of it you made.

(*Then he brings, not the small pan that Oonah had set on the hearth, but a large griddle with brown bread upon it.*)

Oonah (*puzzled*).

I was thinking 'twas a little cake I baked. I'm glad 'tis larger.

(*They sit down, Aengus opposite Oonah, Aileel between them facing audience. Oonah breaks*

off pieces of the bread and puts them on the plates.)

Aileel.

May I lift the pitcher for you to pour the wine?

Oonah.

'Tis not wine, Aileel, or even milk, but 'tis good cold water at least, so we shall not go thirsty.

Aileel.

Why no, 'tis wine (*pouring*), and in this jug is good rich milk.

Oonah (*springing up to look*).

Oh Aengus, 'tis magic! The cow went dry before granny died, and there is no wine in all Galway except at rich men's houses! (*She goes round the table and clings to Aengus, who sits staring.*)

Aileel (*unmoved*).

Why, 'tis a fine feast you have in spite of the famine. Here are nuts in this dish, and under the cloth you have little white cakes

hidden. (*Springing up gaily.*) And here come the neighbors to eat with you.

(*The door opens and old Maurya comes in with a basket in her hands. She is excited and eager.*)

Maurya.

'Tis a miracle, Oonah darling. For the gray hens that have not laid these many days, all cackled at once like mad, and here are twelve eggs in a basket, and joy to your wedding.

Oonah (*running to her*).

How wonderful, Maurya, and how good you are! But how did you know I was married?

Maurya.

A messenger ran with the news, but he was gone so quick I could not see who he was. 'Twas all in a gust of the wind like.

Oonah.

Aengus, is it not strange? (*To Maurya.*) Sit by the fire, good neighbor.

(*Aengus brings her cakes and wine.*)

Maurya.

'Tis a wonderful feast you have.

Aileel.

Here are some more guests. Look!

(*The door opens and Sheamus and Tumaus enter, the one bearing a rabbit and the other a wild duck.*)

Aengus.

Welcome, neighbors!

Tumaus.

Good luck to your wedding, and here is a gift for it. I walked by the pond and two ducks flew before me, and I shot both with one aim. And when the messenger told of your marriage, I said, "'Tis one of the ducks I'll be taking for a present."

Sheamus.

And I was just bending over my traps, when a voice cried "Aengus and Oonah are married and it's a feast they have"; and I looked up to catch sight of the messenger, and when

I looked back at my traps there were two hares struggling. And here is one, and good wishes to you!

Aengus.

'Tis good neighbors you are! Come, share what we have.

(*Oonah brings them wine and cake.*)

Tumaus.

'Tis rich you must be, Aengus, with such a wedding feast for us.

Aileel.

Here are more guests. Look!

(*The door opens and Sheila, Kathleen and Finula enter. Each carries a roll of linen which she lays in Oonah's arms, kissing her.*)

Kathleen.

You did not tell me you would be married so soon, but I had a web of cloth put by for you that I wove myself. Happiness to you!

Sheila.

I, too, Oonah, and I give you joy!

Finula.

And I!

Oonah.

Dear neighbors, I'm not knowing how to thank you. But how did you know of the wedding?

Finula.

A little boy ran with the news — a boy in green.

Sheila.

But he was gone so quick, I could not see his face.

Aileel.

Here is the last guest. Look!

(*Martin staggers in under a sack of potatoes as the door opens.*)

Aengus.

Martin! Why man, it's welcome you are, but what have you there?

Martin.

'Tis a lucky man I am, Aengus, for I thought my potatoes were spoiled in the ground. But only a few are spoiled and here are as many

as I could dig up since the messenger went running by with the news of your wedding. Good luck go with them?

Aengus.

Is it dreaming I am? Friends, to-day I was only a poor lonely man with nothing in the world but this bit of a bundle — (*takes his staff from where it leans against the settle*). Why 'tis heavy it is! Oonah, Oonah! (*He unties the handkerchief and a shower of silver money falls on the floor.*)

Oonah.

Oh! 'tis a fortune you have!

The Rest.

Look! Look! Did anybody ever see so much money?
(*They exclaim to each other.*)

Oonah.

But you said you were poor.

Aileel.

'Twas a trick he played on you, Oonah, to see if you'd marry him a poor man. (*He signs Aengus to be silent.*)

Oonah.

Is it true?

The Rest (*laughing and clapping*).

A fine trick! A wonderful trick! Good for you, Aengus!

(*They pick up the money and put it in Oonah's apron.*)

Maurya.

And now it is dancing you ought to be. Push back the tables, for dancing feet echo a happy heart better than words.

All.

Oh yes, the dancing! Help with the tables there! Lift this out out of the way! (*They talk happily as they clear the room.*)

Maurya.

'Tis good luck to dance with the bride. Oonah, who will you be giving the luck to?

Oonah.

To Aileel. Why I promised Aileel when I thought it was no feasting and dancing we could have — but I am glad I promised.

Aileel.

I have no wedding gift for you, Oonah, but perhaps you will let me give you the music for the dance.

Oonah.

How can you? Your harp is broken!

Aileel.

Yet I think some music will come from it. See, there is one string left.

Oonah.

But how can you play, Aileel, while you are dancing?

Aileel.

You shall see! (*He clears a place on the table, places his harp upon it, and taking the twig of thorn from his breast, lays it across the strings. Immediately there is soft music, as if the harp*

were played by unseen hands.) Will you give me your hand, oh beautiful bride?

(*Oonah lays her hand in his, as if in a dream. They dance a stately measure, the others watching in a silent awe. When the dance is over, Aileel leads Oonah to Aengus and joins their hands.*)

Aileel.

Keep her safe, oh husband — guard her close! For she is the rose of the world! (*Takes his harp and the thorn.*) The happy hour is past and I must go. 'Tis sunset and the wind is calling me. Listen!

(*The fairy song comes softly from outside the house; the door opens of itself, the music swelling louder, and Aileel moves slowly backward toward it, his eyes on Oonah, the twig of thorn in his hand. As he reaches the door, the music swells triumphantly to the chorus, "Oh come to us, mortal." He smiles sadly, raises his hand in farewell, and steps backward across the threshold, the door closing of itself. The rest remain*

staring silently at the door, Oonah in the circle of Aengus's arm, while the music grows fainter and fainter.)

CURTAIN

NOTES

THE TWIG OF THORN

NOTES

The little play was first written for the Philadelphia Society of Brooklyn Heights Seminary, by whose members it was very charmingly produced on April sixteenth, 1910, in Memorial Hall, Brooklyn, New York.

No one can touch, even ever so lightly, the old traditions of Ireland, without falling under the spell of their magic: thus, though Oonah and Aengus and Aileel do not exist among the old tales, the loving study of many and many of these went into the making of their story. For her knowledge of the old customs and traditions referred to, the writer is indebted most to the various writings of Dr. Douglas Hyde, of Mr. William Butler Yeats, and of Lady Augusta Gregory.

Some of the references may be the better for a word of explanation: —

Saint Brigit, or Saint Bride as she is often called, was, after Saint Patrick himself, the most noted figure among Irish Christians of the fifth century. She was universally known as "the Mary of the Gael," and many miracles were ascribed to her.

NOTES

TUATHA DE DANANN [*Tu-a-tha De Dón-nan*], or Tribes of the goddess Danu, were the elder semi-divine inhabitants of Ireland. Later they became confused with the SIDHE [*Shee*] or Faery Hosts. Sidhe is also the Gaelic word for wind, and the Faery people who bear this name journey on the whirling gusts, and have most power when the winds are high. They frequently steal away mortals, either casting them into a magic sleep, during which they are said to be "away," or removing them altogether from the mortal world.

NAIMH [*Neé-av*] was a most beautiful woman of the Tribes of Danu, a daughter of the king of the Land of the Young, as the Faery country is called. OISIN or OSSIAN [*Us-sheén*] the poet-warrior, left his country and people to follow her, and returned only after thousands of years, to find the church-bells tolling over Ireland, and the good Saint Patrick preaching to the people.

November, the old beginning of winter, was associated with the powers of darkness, dismay, and death. Evil and mischievous spirits were believed to have special power at this time.

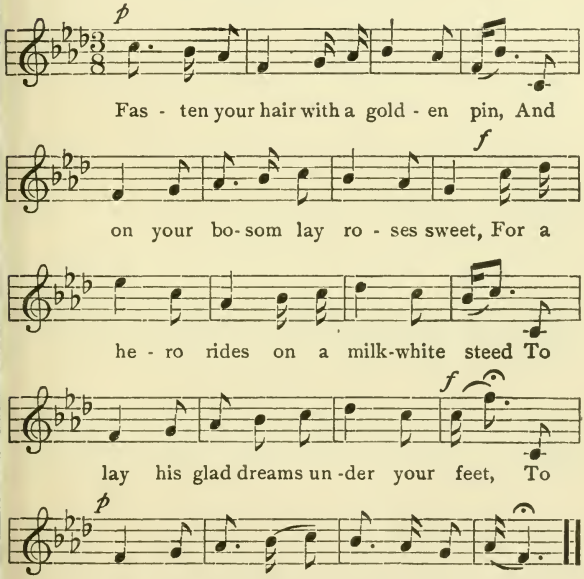
The thorn is, of course, accursed because of its part in the torment of the Crucifixion.

The music which follows was written for the original production by Mr. Royal Stone Smith of Brooklyn, New

York, to whose courtesy the writer is greatly indebted for its publication here. The harp, violin, or piano scores may be obtained by writing Mr. Smith in care of the publisher.

FASTEN YOUR HAIR WITH A GOLDEN PIN

PAGE 25



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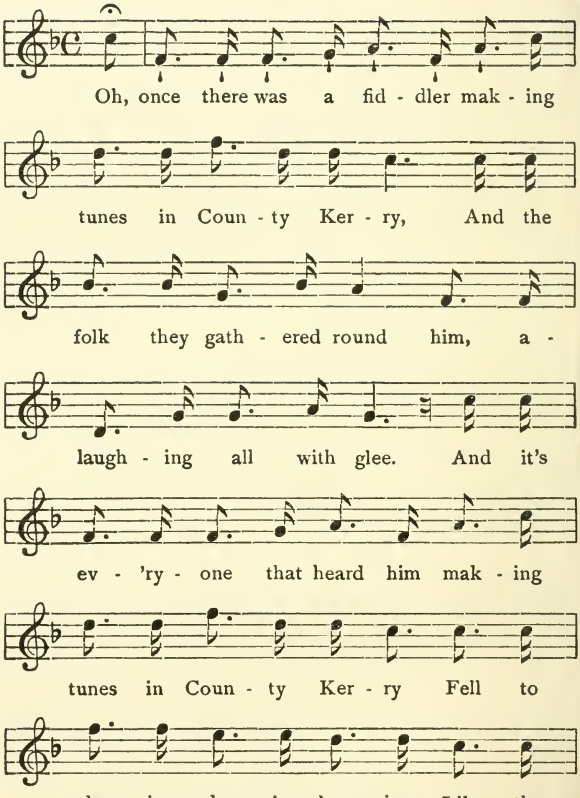
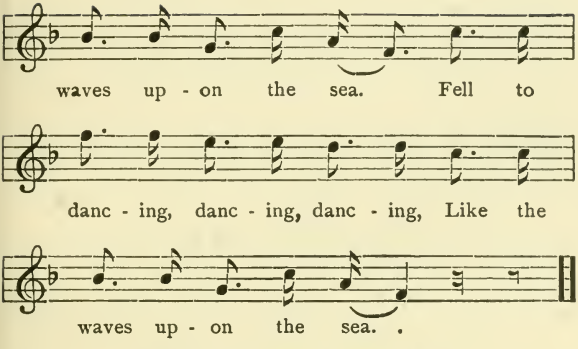
NOTES

OH, ONCE THERE WAS A FIDDLER

PAGE 33





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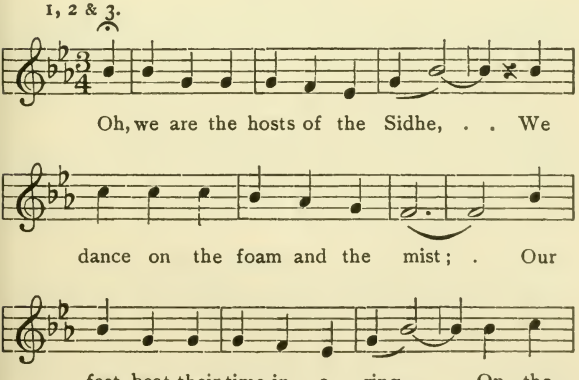
OH, WE ARE THE HOSTS OF THE SIDHE

PAGE 66



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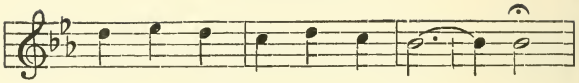
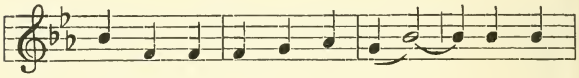
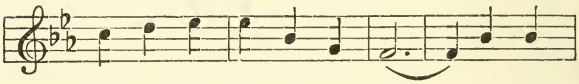


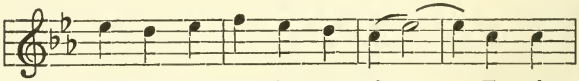
dew that the moon-beams have kissed. Oh



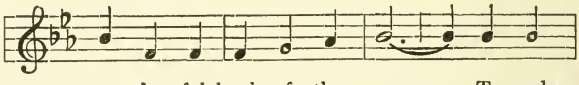
come to us, mor-tal, oh come! . On the



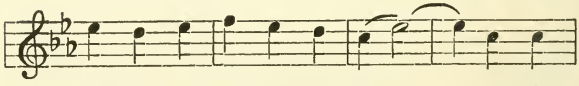
path of gold prim-ros-es flung, To make



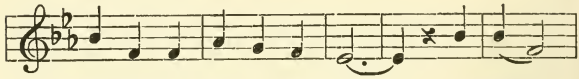
gold-en the way for your feet . . To the



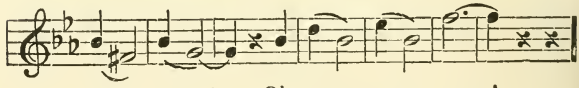
won-der-ful land of the young. To make



gold-en the way for your feet, . . To the

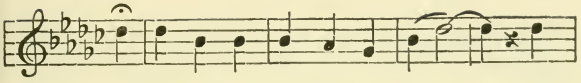


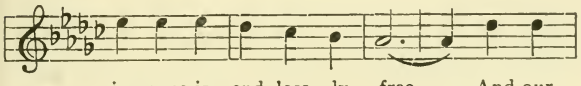
won-der-ful land of the young. Oh, come,

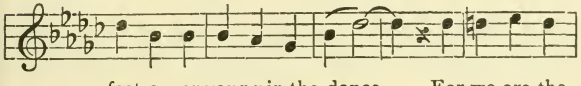


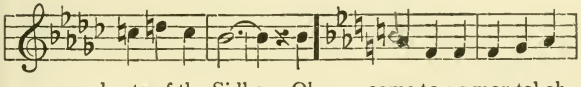
come, come! Oh, come, come, come!

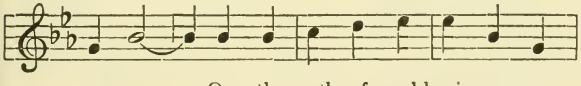
4th verse.

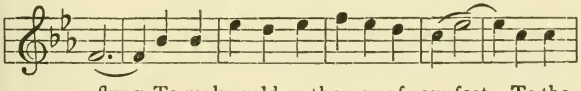

A hun-dred glad years are a day, Our

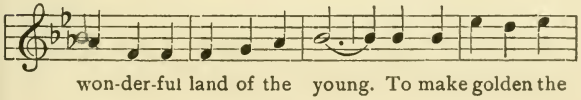

joy-ance is end- less - ly free, . And our

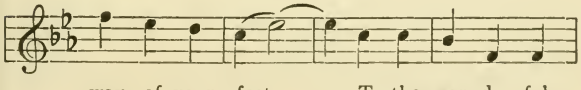

feet ev- er young in the dance, For we are the


hosts of the Sidhe. Oh come to us,mor-tal,oh


come, . . On the path of gold prim-ros- es


flung, To make gold-en the way of your feet To the


won-der-ful land of the young. To make golden the


way of your feet, . . To the won- der - ful

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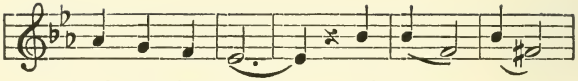

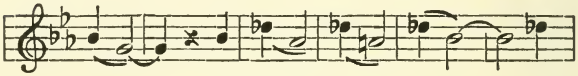

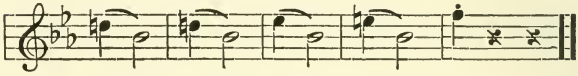

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